

## Wir sind UP – The Podcast

### Guest: Mareike Haley

#### Title of the episode:

Studying with Children

#### Transcription:

**Intro:** Welcome to all the listeners. In our podcast, we introduce you to students, teachers, and administrative staff from the University of Potsdam. These individuals come from diverse backgrounds, including those with and without disabilities. We want to explore how inclusive the University of Potsdam is as both a place of study and employment.

**Erika:** Hello and a warm welcome to everyone to today's episode of "Wir sind UP" (We are UP). I'm Erika, and today I have Mareike Haley with me for a conversation. She is a master's student at the University of Potsdam and has had two children during her studies. In this episode, we'll discuss Mareike's experiences, the unique challenges associated with studying while fulfilling family responsibilities, and what has helped her successfully complete her studies. Now, over to you, Mareike. Please introduce yourself briefly and feel free to tell us about what you're doing at the University of Potsdam, your field of study, and why you chose it.

**Mareike:** Yes, hello, and thank you for having me. My name is Mareike, I'm 24 years old, and I'm currently pursuing a master's degree in Comparative Literature and Art Studies. Prior to this, I completed a bachelor's degree in General and Comparative Literature and Theater Studies at FU Berlin. During my third semester of the bachelor's program, I became pregnant with my first child, who was born during my fifth semester. When I was in the second semester of my master's program, my second child was born. So, thank you for inviting me.

**Erika:** You're very welcome, Mareike. Let's dive into our Q&A session. As you mentioned, you're a mother of two young children, and I understand that your older child is just four years old, so they are quite young. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of studying as a parent, and what challenges do you face beyond the traditional issue of time constraints?

**Mareike:** Well, I think I need to start with a disclaimer that I receive financial aid (BAföG), which is an incredible privilege when studying with children. It allows me to manage my studies while occasionally having a part-time job. The biggest advantage, I would say, is that I am extremely focused. I know I need to complete my studies during my BAföG eligibility period; otherwise, it will become much harder. Generally, I work very efficiently, and every minute counts. I always have something related to my studies with me because you never know when a child might fall asleep on the bus, giving you ten minutes to work. In the long run, another advantage is that when I enter the job market, my children will be older, and I'll have more freedom. For me, my children are also the perfect balance to my studies. I know there are more important things than getting a perfect grade. Before having children, I was incredibly perfectionistic in my studies, and now, it's enough if I've done my best. I have less time for my studies, but often, I end up working on my studies in my head even when I have to stop midway because a child wakes up or I have to pick someone up from daycare. When I sit down again during a free moment, I find that I can get back into work much faster than before when I had set, discrete blocks of time.

As for the disadvantages, I believe the biggest one is the class schedule, especially for the upcoming semester. I think about 60% of my course schedule is incompatible with daycare hours. This semester, the classes are either from 2 PM to 4 PM, 4 PM to 6 PM, or even later in the evening. So, you have to take what's available. In my case, there's only one seminar from 10 AM to 12 PM and a

blog seminar. That means you don't have much choice. Another drawback is the lack of time for extra activities. The University of Potsdam offers numerous interesting colloquia and workshops, but organizing attendance can be a lot of work. Plus, children can unexpectedly get sick, or they might be very reliant on you for bedtime routines. That often doesn't align with attending these events. Another downside is that while most of the courses I've taken have been very understanding of my situation, there was one course at another university where someone questioned whether it was even allowed for me to bring my child. At that time, I was still breastfeeding. It was a bit challenging, but, as I mentioned, this was an exception, and generally, people are accepting. I would say it was easiest to bring them with me between zero and seven months, and then it got more challenging from eight months to three years. However, recently, I had my son with me, and it was easier again because he could sit next to me and keep himself occupied, even if he kept saying it was boring. And in general, you are dependent on others, on your child, and on caregivers. That's another point to consider.

**Erika:** Yes, yes. Okay, you're speaking my mind completely. I don't know if we discussed this before, but I'm also a student with a child. I just can't interview myself in the podcast. You have two children, I have one, and she's two and a half. Yes, I had her during my bachelor's, I think it was the fourth or fifth semester. I can absolutely relate to all the advantages and disadvantages you've mentioned. My husband is also a student, which, I don't know how it is for you, but it's an advantage for us because we can manage our schedules to some extent and try to coordinate who takes which courses when. There have been semesters where he only took one course, and there have been semesters where I did the same, just to make it easier for the other to focus more on their studies. This flexibility is something we have because we're both students, which might not be the case if one of us was working full-time.

**Mareike:** Yes, for us, it's a bit of a different challenge because my husband is a musician, and his work schedule is completely asynchronous with mine. So, if he has a concert and comes home at 3 AM, he can't take care of the kids in the morning. This often led to situations where I had to bring them to the university.

**Erika:** Those are additional challenges indeed. When you deviate from the traditional setup where "the man works full-time"...

Okay, let me continue with my next question. You've mentioned some already, but what measures or strategies do you take to successfully manage your studies despite family responsibilities? One thing you mentioned is bringing the kids with you. Do you have any other strategies or approaches?

**Mareike:** Yes, in general, both of my children have been attending daycare since they were one and a half, or they are just starting now. It's a significant help, and on days when I have classes, they usually go either for early or late care, depending on my class schedule. However, in the last semester, there was a course when my daughter wasn't attending daycare yet, and it didn't make sense to bring her because it was a theoretical class. In that case, I was extremely fortunate that my mother came to the university with me and sat with my daughter in the parent-child room at the New Palais, taking care of her. I was in a seminar on the floor above, and whenever my daughter got tired or needed to be breastfed, my mom would message me, and I'd come down to attend to her. It was truly a luxury, and I'm very grateful to my mom for it. Additionally, for special events, my mom or my husband helps out by looking after the children, allowing me to attend evening events. For example, in January, I have to go to Bavaria for a conference, and my husband will accompany me and take care of the kids while I'm at the conference.

Apart from that, it's all about effective time management on my part and always having a plan for when that time management goes awry. For example, before my daughter started daycare, I used to wake up at 5 AM or work during the night when she was sleeping to write my master's thesis. It usually worked well, but there were times when someone would wake up at 5:10 AM, and the day would begin two hours earlier than expected. So, you have to plan for things going off track. In terms

of BAföG, I applied for the child supplements for both children for both my bachelor's and master's degrees. I also requested two extensions due to pregnancies and childcare responsibilities for young children.

**Erika:** Exactly. When you receive BAföG and have children, the so-called standard study period is extended, right? You're allowed to study for a longer period.

**Mareike:** Exactly. For each pregnancy or year of a child's life, it adds an extra semester. In my case, I think I could theoretically receive BAföG for seven semesters.

**Erika:** Well, that's something, at least.

**Mareike:** Yes, but you don't get extra semesters per child. You get them for childcare in general. So, if I've been a parent for three years, I still only get three additional semesters, not six because I have two children.

**Erika:** Yes, I understand. I've also experienced frustration stories. Since I became a parent, I'm much less frustrated when I can't accomplish everything I set out to do, which was different before. I used to work day and night to get everything done, and now I think, okay, if I haven't finished by 4 or 5 PM, then so be it. I'll continue the next day because I have to pick up my child.

**Mareike:** Yes, exactly. What was also crucial for me was learning to accept that, in the beginning, I often tried to work when my child was awake. It just doesn't work. You have to focus on one thing.

**Erika:** As far as I know, your first child was born in 2019, right?

**Mareike:** That's right.

**Erika:** Okay, shortly after that came the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, and online learning. How did you experience your studies during that time? Was it an advantage?

**Mareike:** My son was born at the end of November 2019, and my original plan was to return to university in January, but then he had to go to the hospital, and my plan got postponed to the summer semester, which was, as you know, held online. For me, the online format was a dream in terms of compatibility with having a baby because it eliminated all the travel time. I have to say, I preferred the asynchronous lectures and seminars because I could do them at 5 AM or 2 AM when my son was asleep. During those times, I could actually learn something because in the synchronous online seminars, especially as he got a bit older, well, I was always present, but it was more theoretical presence. When a child is climbing all over you, you tend to absorb the minimum from the lecture. So, whenever I had to give a presentation or attend an important seminar, I would go to my mom's house. She would take care of my son, and I would be in another room doing the Zoom call. Even when I was at home, and my husband was taking care of him, we lived in a 35-square-meter apartment at the time, and my son would stand behind the glass kitchen door and watch me. It didn't work so well.

**Erika:** I can imagine. We did something similar. During the exam period, we moved in with my parents for four weeks. We basically took over their upstairs floor. They live quite far from here, almost 500 kilometers away. Both of us had exams, and my daughter was just a few months old. There was no other way. We just moved in for four weeks, and the upper floor was ours. We had to study. Good luck with the child. It's great to have family you can rely on for support.

**Mareike:** Absolutely.

**Erika:** Speaking of support, were there any university assistance or counseling services that helped you during your studies, which you utilized? If so, which ones were they?

**Mareike:** The most significant help for me has definitely been the Parent-Child rooms provided by the Family Services. Not only did my mom babysit my kids there when I had seminars and the

daycare was closed, but I also go there often when the daycare is closed because those rooms are really great. I can't work there with two little kids, but they enjoy playing with all the toys, and I can at least mark some books to read later when they're asleep. The Parent-Child rooms here in Potsdam, along with the one in the Grimm Library at HU Berlin, are the best-equipped ones I know of.

Regarding counseling services, I visited the psychological counseling center in Berlin during my first pregnancy. Personally, it wasn't the best experience for me, but I know it helps many others. During my second pregnancy, I mainly looked into the Studentenwerk (student services) because I was considering taking a leave of absence. Typically, as a student, you're not eligible for unemployment benefits, but there's a special provision. If you take a leave of absence due to having a child, you can theoretically receive unemployment benefits for that leave of absence instead of BAföG. In the end, I decided against it because it would have meant less money than continuing full-time with BAföG. Since my daughter was born just before the semester break, it was manageable. But that was pretty much the only thing I used.

**Erika:** Did you happen to apply for any accommodations or adjustments for your studies?

**Mareike:** I didn't apply for any in Potsdam, but that's mainly because my program is incredibly small, and it wasn't necessary. In my bachelor's program, I did have accommodations, but I mainly used them to get into the courses I needed to accommodate my schedule. Additionally, there isn't, as far as I know, any direct attendance requirement in Potsdam, at least not in my program.

**Erika:** That's right, there isn't.

**Mareike:** That's why I didn't need an accommodation to be able to miss classes but could simply communicate directly with my professors.

**Erika:** Yeah, okay, that works too, especially if you can have direct communication with the instructors. You might be able to avoid some formal accommodations. However, you could also include in the accommodations, probably subject to agreement, something like being allowed to request exemptions outside of deadlines, for example, for exams, registration, and withdrawal deadlines. But you probably handle that directly.

**Mareike:** Yes, I have to say, I think I was also just lucky with my program, specifically my field of study because I've never taken an exam in my entire academic career. I've only written papers. Well, that's not entirely true; I had to take exams for my language seminars. But for everything else, it's been papers, and they're really compatible with having kids. For example, the 5 AM wake-up routine. I think if I had to study for an exam at 5 AM, it would have been a different story than reading a book for a paper at 5 AM.

**Erika:** I understand. Okay, we're almost at my... No, now it's the second-to-last question. Exactly. What advice would you like to give to other students who might say, "I can't go to university; I have a child," or "I have to drop out of my studies because I can't manage it with a child or children"?

**Mareike:** I believe that with the right time management, it can definitely be done. The big point is, of course, financing, but there are really many resources available, especially for single parents, that can help. However, I would also say that not only is financial support essential, but also the mental support. I'm fortunate to have a lot of support from my mother and my husband, both of whom really encourage my education. So, you need that kind of support that reminds you that your education is important, and the importance of your education doesn't diminish because you have children.

Overall, I think the most significant piece of advice is to ignore a lot of things. As a mother, you'll be judged one way or another, so do what you believe is best. You don't have to drop out of your studies because you have a child. As long as you're 100 percent with your child, or even 90 percent when you have to be at the university, it doesn't matter what you do while your child is in daycare.

Particularly in the baby years, I was extremely grateful for my studies. Babies are wonderful, but they don't necessarily provide intellectual stimulation. The university was like an anchor, reminding me that there's another world out there that doesn't just listen to "Baby Shark."

**Erika:** I completely agree with that, truly. I felt the same way when my daughter was just born. If I didn't have that balance of engaging with something intellectual, learning, and furthering my education, as you say, I'd probably go crazy.

**Mareike:** Yes, especially with very young babies, when they're truly newborns, it's just that you're stuck in a kind of monotony, and it can drive you almost crazy.

**Erika:** Absolutely, I can relate.

**Mareike:** Also, what else did I want to say? Oh, right, another thing is that the big challenge with studying while having children is that you're usually not financially stable, but depending on what you're studying, you're generally much more flexible than in a fixed job. This flexibility proves to be quite practical during daycare hours because even if a child is enrolled in daycare, it often doesn't mean they'll actually attend. Either the daycare is closed from 2 PM due to staff shortages or the child is sick.

**Erika:** Yes, especially in the beginning, right? In the first two years of daycare.

**Mareike:** Yes, it's really extreme then. Another advantage or reason why I would definitely say you can continue your studies is that I've found a new kind of courage. I'm not only studying for myself; I also want my children to be proud of me, and I want to show them that they can achieve anything if they seek the right help. Maybe it will take longer, but it's worth it because in the end, you have something you've done for yourself. In a practical sense, this newfound courage also helps me. For example, I used to be very afraid of presentations, and now I always think to myself, I've had two children inside me; I can talk in front of five people for 20 minutes.

**Erika:** Yes, having been through childbirth, you can certainly handle it.

**Mareike:** I'll definitely survive this.

**Erika:** Indeed. When you've been so exposed while giving birth, with five people dancing around you and looking everywhere, yes, once you've been through that, you feel like you can handle anything. Okay, now I'm getting to my last question, which is almost sentimental, but if you could turn back time and relive your studies from the beginning, what would you change?

**Mareike:** I'm generally quite happy with how my studies have gone. I'm especially glad that I was very motivated at the beginning and had completed many internships in the first two semesters of my studies, which has given me a head start for when my children are in daycare. Overall, I'm very pleased that I always wrote my essays as early as possible. This has proven to be a good idea when you have children.

One thing I wish I had realized earlier in relation to children is that no one will thank you for bringing them to the university. In the sense that sometimes, I rush around and once even went into a seminar with both children because the daycare was closed, and no one had time to take care of them. Although both children were well-behaved, they obviously annoyed others in the room. I felt really bad and embarrassed because I came to show that I'm not hiding behind my children or using them as an excuse to attend less, but I really always try to come and make it work. This experience somehow showed me that it doesn't make sense, and... I mean, sure, just ignore the others. I'd also like to tell myself that earlier. On the other hand, if you don't have to come, or even if you feel like you have to come, it's usually better not to come.

**Erika:** I understand what you mean. Absolutely. Yes, you do your best, make an effort, show up, and then you get those strange looks. Oh man. Yes, it's not appreciated, that's for sure. Okay, thank you, dear Mareike, for this informative and interesting insight into your life and your studies here at the

University of Potsdam, and of course, thank you for your openness and the opportunity to interview you for our format. I also thank all the listeners for their attention and bid farewell now. Many thanks, Mareike, and goodbye!

**Mareike:** Goodbye.